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A "UNIT" IN SOCIOLOGY—A REPLY TO PROFESSOR SMALL.

The questions which Professor Small raises in connection with my paper on "The Unit of Consideration in Sociology" indicate plainly that I have not made my thought clear in respect to one or two fundamental notions involved in the discussion. Some of Professor Small's inquiries would carry the discussion a step farther than was attempted in my original paper, and I am indebted to him for some suggestions which make possible a restatement of my thought in a way that I did not contemplate at the outset.

Professor Small's two classes of sociologists are not mutually exclusive, but if I understand his meaning he is right in supposing that my sympathies would be rather with the second class to which he refers, namely, "those who think of sociology as a search for the meaning elements in associated human life." Such an aim gives us a concrete science but does not prescribe any particular method. In general, I fancy that I would lay more stress than Professor Small upon the use of a deductive method, even in a concrete science, in the classification and arrangement of the multitudinous inductions necessary as a part of this "search for the meaning elements in associated human life." It was this factor of method in Professor Ross' work that seemed to me to make his achievement something of a new departure in recent sociological literature. I do not assume at all that the data of sociology are at hand in the sense that they are complete. Some data are readily accessible, and the work of making them complete will progress as scientific description of society gains in accuracy and in extent. The trained observer is not so useful in any science in its infancy, paradoxical as this may sound, as the man who can make some use of the meagre results of even crude and imperfect observation, and single out the few elementary, general and typical things that hold good within limits that determine the boundaries of a science. Ricardo was a poor observer of the facts in the economic life of his time, but no one did more to advance economic science to a stage at which verification of established principles and modification of those principles in the light of subsequent verification could be carried on by others. When a science is in this stage the trained observer, the man who will enlarge the basis of generalization, is the man who is at a premium in the ranks of its devotees. It seems to me that sociology has suffered because the basis of generalization has been altogether too broad out of which to construct a single science unless it be a general science of social phenomena, so vast in its scope and so exacting in its demands as to be, as Professor Alfred Marshall has said, highly desirable but humanly speaking, unattainable."

Another point on which, judging from Professor Small's inquiries, I have laid myself open to misunderstanding, is in the attempt to make all sociological investigation conform to one mould or type of scientific inquiry. I said at the outset of my paper, after having examined briefly the nature of the kind of unit to be considered, that I proposed "to examine briefly one such unit which I will call the 'social imperative.'"^{*} I had in mind distinctly the thought that there might be a number of similar units around which sociological material, or, to be more explicit, newly acquired data in sociology might be profitably grouped. My only contention, if, indeed, contention it be, was regarding the necessity of a unit. It does not seem to me that from the time of Bacon down to the present, the men of science who throw the emphasis upon observation and induction without consciously starting with a principle, however crude, which rests upon previous induction, have materially advanced the subject-matter in hand. One may range the earth for facts and add to his collection to the end of his days without ever getting on the right road to a general principle. General principles are discovered only when, in the examination of facts in the process of verification of some already known or hypothetical principle, one is led to see the truth of a new principle which is capable of wider or deeper verification.

Taking up once more the "social imperative" as a possible unit in sociology, I may add one or two statements to the brief discussion I was able to give in the limits of the first paper. Society arises where a man in his contact with his physical environment finds co-operation with his fellows useful in enabling him to satisfy his primary economic wants. Thus Plato and not Aristotle was right in his account of the origin of society, as I think is abundantly shown by accumulating materials which furnish us information about the most primitive forms of social organization to be discovered on this planet. "Man is by nature a political animal," says Aristotle, and by "political" he means of course social; but this is a generalization that can be verified only in comparatively advanced stages of society when man's nature has been modified by contact with his environment. But the economic factor which accounts for the origin of society and causes one transformation after another in the forms of human society, does not explain the phenomena of society in any of its stages. Here is where the line between economics and sociology, as separate and distinct sciences, must be drawn. If we study any given stage of society within a fixed geographical environment, we can readily find certain economic factors

^{*} ANNALS, Vol. xii, p. 218, September, 1898.

which will account for the existence of this particular stage of society when contrasted with the immediately preceding stage out of which it grew. But the individuals who make up and are a part of this new objective society by reason of changes in their environment, bring with them social standards, ideals and ambitions which are the product of a number of stages of society preceding the one under consideration. What is then sure to happen is, that the great body of these individuals will soon be adjusted to the new economic conditions, but that there will not be a social life and social control to correspond. A few individuals will begin to project in their thought and conduct new modes of activity in their relations to their fellows, and a few new social institutions will arise which must be harmonized with the inheritances of the past. Those modes of social activity more or less adjusted to the economic conditions of a period as embodied in a few individuals and still fewer social institutions, social ambitions and social standards, constitute what I would term the "social imperative." If, therefore, in our "search for the meaning elements in associated human life" the sociologist in whatever department of social facts he is working, will first attempt to ascertain the social imperative, I think he will have a unifying factor that will make his work stand out with perfect clearness, and that he will perform a service not at present rendered by any of the other social sciences.

Such a concept of a unit of investigation does not restrict the freedom of sociologists nor condemn in advance any of the various types of sociological investigation to which Professor Small alludes. In the history of most sciences and especially in the history of economics the attempt has been made to regard some one principle at some time or other as co-extensive with the science. Thus in economics it was supposed that all economic phenomena could be interpreted in terms of the law of diminishing returns, and again in the law of rent; in physics, that all phenomena of physical science could be interpreted in terms of the law of gravitation. Subsequent progress in these sciences proved of course that these general laws and principles furnished a formula for stating only a portion of the observed facts. If the social imperative proves to be a useful concept in connection with some of the more important problems now engrossing the attention of sociological students, as I believe it will, it may well fall into its relative place along side of other concepts which are destined to advance our science.

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P. S.—Proof sheets of the above statement were sent to Professor Small and with his permission I quote a few sentences from a letter received from him after

he had read my reply. "Your reply has just reached me, and it leaves nothing for me to say. Perhaps the misunderstanding is entirely the reader's fault, but I am certainly one among several who read your paper without getting the impression which this reply conveys. Perhaps others will think that we have wasted words over this matter, but I am glad to find myself more nearly in agreement with your thought than I supposed. . . . My whole objection was virtually to the use of the idea of a 'unit' in the sense to which you allude in your closing paragraph. I think you have not overestimated the probable usefulness of the *social imperative* idea, if it is guarded from being a blanket mortgage upon 'meaning elements.' "